

The spread of nuclear weapons poses grave and serious threats to U.S. national security and global stability. To help more fully evaluate and mitigate these threats, I co-founded last year the bipartisan Congressional Nuclear Security Caucus. Drawing from leading experts on nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and homeland security, the Caucus seeks to identify the most urgent vulnerabilities and facilitate immediate action to improve international nuclear safeguards, secure nuclear materials, and prevent the misuse of sensitive nuclear technologies.

To help Nebraskans keep up-to-date on these and other national security issues, I will be periodically sending out via e-mail a Congressional Nuclear Security Caucus Communique. Each Communique will describe recent and upcoming activities of the Caucus, as well as the latest developments in global nuclear security. As part of our ongoing dialogue, I encourage you to read the Communique, and share your thoughts and concerns on these critical matters by contacting me via my website, Fortenberry.house.gov.

Gauging Progress in U.S.-Russian Talks to Reduce Nuclear Arms

As I write, American and Russian diplomats are working overtime in Geneva, Switzerland, to finish talks for a sequel to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), a pact that has limited bilateral deployments of nuclear arms since the early 1990s. Although the START Treaty technically expired on December 5, 2009, President Obama and Russian President Medvedev announced that their countries would continue to observe the spirit of the pact in the absence of a replacement treaty. U.S. and Russian diplomats hope that they can agree on a new pact early next year.

To help Members of the House of Representatives navigate the uncertainties surrounding efforts to negotiate and ratify a sequel to the START Treaty, the Congressional Nuclear Security Caucus plans to host a discussion on Capitol Hill with General Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Adviser to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush, tentatively in early 2010.

Evaluating the Proposed Global Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

In a Congressional Nuclear Security Caucus event this autumn, I co-hosted on Capitol Hill a panel discussion of renowned nuclear experts representing divergent views on proposed U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The CTBT seeks to establish a global ban all tests of nuclear weapons, but well-meaning experts differ on whether the treaty is effectively verifiable, fully enforceable, and beneficial-on-balance to U.S. national security.

Four panelists joined me as Members of the Congress and their staffs waded through the debates over CTBT: George Perkovich, Vice President of the Carnegie Endowment for

International Peace; James Acton, Nonproliferation Associate at the Carnegie Endowment; Stephen Rademaker, former Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation; and Ambassador C. Paul Robinson, former Director of Sandia National Laboratories.

Reining in the Risks of an Iranian Nuclear Bomb?

Clouds of suspicion continue to loom over Iran's nuclear intentions. In September the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the world's nuclear watchdog, learned that Iran had secretly built deep within a mountain at an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps base another nuclear facility that could be used, in time, to enrich uranium for use in an atomic bomb. In an effort to diffuse the situation, the United States, France and Russia had offered to provide Iran with nuclear fuel for a small research reactor in Tehran, if Iran would agree to ship abroad the bulk of the uranium that it could divert for eventual use in nuclear weapons. Although Iranian negotiators in Geneva had tentatively accepted the deal, Iran's leaders effectively rejected it.

In late November, the IAEA's multilateral Board of Governors passed a resolution censuring Iran's alarming lack of transparency, and urging it to open up its nuclear program completely to international nuclear inspectors. According to news reports in mid-December, however, Western and IAEA officials are now examining a recently-uncovered Iranian technical memo that suggests Iran's nuclear scientists have tested a key component necessary to detonate a nuclear warhead.

Although Iran's ongoing nuclear intransigence may seem far removed from America's heartland, I bring to your attention these distant yet worrisome developments because of their gravity. The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran is not just a serious concern in of itself, but risks setting off destabilizing nuclear arms races or worse throughout the Middle East. I will continue to work with other Members of Congress and the Executive Branch to find sustainable policies that reduce nuclear dangers in that volatile region.